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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/24/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KHUM](#) [BA](#) [HUMRIT](#) [POL](#)
SUBJECT: MOCK GTMO SOCCER MATCH NIXED BY MINISTRY OF SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT

REF: MANAMA 1101

Classified By: A/DCM Steve Bondy for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) In an attempt to link World Cup fever in the Kingdom with UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture June 26, Bahrain's local chapter of Amnesty International (AI), which is not an officially registered NGO with the Ministry of Social Development, had plans to conduct a mock soccer match June 23 to raise public awareness about detainees at Guantanamo Bay. The match entitled "The Great Game of Injustice: Guantanamo Bay," was to feature "prison guards" versus "detainees," who were to play with their hands bound behind their backs and whose goalkeeper was to be blindfolded. The guards, representing U.S. military personnel, were to play unfairly and ignore foul calls of the referee, who was to represent the UN.

¶2. (U) However, AI Bahrain coordinator Nasser Burdestani told the press June 24 that he received a call from Ministry of Social Development Assistant Undersecretary Waheed Al Qassim prior to the start of the match informing Burdestani that the police would be called to intervene if the match went ahead. The press reported that Al Qassim said that since AI Bahrain was not officially registered, it had no right to conduct any activities.

¶3. (C) AI Bahrain head of campaigns Fawzia Rabea told PolOff June 24 that AI activists were surprised and confused by the ministry's action. She said that AI Bahrain has conducted activities in Bahrain since its registration with the AI International Secretariat in London in 2002 and has had previous communication and cooperation with several Bahraini officials in the Ministries of Health, Interior, and Foreign Affairs. She wondered whether there was more behind the Ministry of Social Development's decision than simply the registration issue. When AI Bahrain was first established in 2002, AI London advised it not to register for fear that the GOB might attempt to impose control over AI Bahrain's activities. However, according to Rabea, AI Bahrain may consider this option more seriously now after the soccer match was canceled. She said AI Bahrain's next step was to inform AI London about the cancellation and solicit guidance from the secretariat.

¶4. (C) Bahrain Human Rights Society head of training Abdulnabi Al Ekri expressed his surprise publicly June 24 saying, "This is an international issue and even in the U.S. there is opposition to Guantanamo Bay. The whole world is asking for the closure of Guantanamo and Bahrain's government claims it has addressed this matter with the U.S. government. I think this game could even have taken place in the U.S. without being objected to." Al Ekri told PolOff privately that he is seeing increasing attempts to restrict and control

civil society activities, but that the scrutiny is selective and inconsistent. He speculated that AI Bahrain activities may not have attracted much public attention previously, but this event had a higher profile and was therefore targeted by the ministry.

15. (C) Comment: As reported in reftel, the GOB is particularly sensitive of late about the perception of inaction on behalf of the three remaining Bahraini detainees at GTMO. Through this proposed mock match, AI Bahrain may have pushed too hard on a sore spot and the GOB reacted. Questions about AI Bahrain's status in country are reminiscent of the problems NDI faces. Until the GOB finds a legal way to register international NGOs, groups like NDI and AI can face difficulties operating in Bahrain.

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